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ABSTRACT

This document is comprised of four consecutive issues (Winter 1998-Fall 1999) of a newsletter published quarterly to provide information on current research and practice to early childhood professionals teaching in the primary grades in Colorado, Iowa, Nebraska, Missouri, and Montana. The winter 1998 issue focuses on retention in the early grades, reviewing research, and providing alternative strategies. The spring 1999 issue also addresses grade retention, asserting that a long trail of research indicates that retention is not the appropriate route to improve student achievement. This issue also contains a brief summary of literacy accomplishments that should be evident in third-graders. The summer 1999 issue discusses myths of literacy development and contains a reprint of an ERIC Digest on kindergarten entrance age. The fall 1999 issue covers effective first-grade teaching methods, including how to build strong readers and writers, how to assess school readiness, and literacy accomplishments that should be evident in first-graders. (EV)

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Retention in the Early Grades: A Review of the Research

Beckie Anderson,
in collaboration with the staff at
RMC Research Corporation

Because retention and promotion practices are expressions of beliefs about purposes of education, retention is a complex and emotionally laden issue. This guide is designed to help you examine your district's or school's retention policies and practices and to determine the impact of your retention practices.

Why do teachers retain young children?

A large majority of teachers interviewed by Smith (1989) viewed retention as beneficial to students. Teachers talked about children who had been retained as assuming more leadership, being more comfortable with the routine, being more cooperative, having greater self-confidence, becoming more a part of the social group, and achieving more academic success.

In Smith's study (1989:136), almost half of the 40 kindergarten teachers interviewed based their retention recommendations on their beliefs about children's maturity levels. These teachers "believe that, within some normal range of environments, children become more prepared for school according to an evolutionary, physiological unfolding of abilities."

There are other factors influencing teachers' decisions to retain students. In interviews with 25 teachers, Byrnes (1989) reported that while teachers were concerned about retaining students, they often felt it would be worse for a child to be promoted because of the expectations in the following grade. Several teachers mentioned a fear of being criticized by the teachers in the next grade for passing students who were ill-prepared. Allington and McGill-Franzen (1995) describe teachers in one school who reported significant embarrassment when a student they promoted was "sent back down" for being unable to read the assigned trade book for that grade.

Research studies have shown that groups of retained children demonstrate a short-term "bounce" in performance in relation to same grade comparison groups of children who performed in the lowest quartile on norm referenced tests; however, this advantage decreases over time. Holmes (1989), in his meta-analysis of multiple studies on retention, found that after three grades there was no difference between children who were retained and those who were not, even though the retained children were one year older. This temporary "bounce" in the performance of retained students provides one answer to why teachers retain children.

Primary teachers base beliefs about the benefits of retention on incomplete and misleading information.

However, in a carefully controlled study of kindergarten retention, Shepard and Smith (1989:105) found "no boost or academic advantage from the extra year to mature." A similar study on "transition" programs, such as junior first grade or developmental kindergarten, led to the same results (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1995).

Some researchers such as Eads (1990) and Shepard and Smith (1988) believe that retaining students actually has deleterious effects on the school. They believe kindergarten transition programs change the composition of first grade classes to include older, more "mature" students as the younger, "less mature" students are pulled out of their age cohort and placed in the transition program. This allows, perhaps even encourages, the first grade teachers to increase the level of difficulty of what is being taught, a shift referred to as escalating the curriculum. Skills that were once considered to be appropriate to second grade, such as reading, are now being taught to and expected of first graders. Shepard and Smith (1988:37) argue that academics pushed down to a lower grade does not necessarily lead to better learning because "boring proficiencies learned by rote are substituted for conceptual learning and enthusiasm for learning."

In view of the repeated research evidence on the negative effects of retention, Smith (1989:147-148) argues that primary teachers base beliefs about the benefits of retention on incomplete and misleading information.

> *What the teacher lacks access to, however, is the information about what that child would have been like had he been promoted. Indeed, these unseen circumstances are hypothetical, they lack reality, and in fact, she may deny the possibility that with some acceptable level of struggling the child would have succeeded in the subsequent grade and later on would be indistinguishable from his peers.*

continues on page 2

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Retention in the Early Grades: A Review of the Research

continued from page 1

How do children and families experience retention?

In 1989, Byrnes interviewed 71 nonpromoted children about repeating a grade in school. Half of these children were from upper-middle income schools and half were from lower-middle income schools. In private interviews, 27 percent of the retained children did not admit to the interviewer that they had been retained. When asked how they felt or would feel if they were retained, 84 percent of the responses focused on "sad," "bad," and "upset." Byrnes concluded (1989:130) that retained children viewed retention as a "punishment and a stigma, not as a positive event designed to help them."

Byrnes also interviewed principals, teachers and parents. She found that these adults viewed retention as a way to help children who were judged by adults to be unable to deal with the tasks of the next grade.

In another set of interviews, parents reported that the characteristics of the children that were used to make the retention decision, such as lack of attention and poor social skills, were not corrected by an extra year to mature (Shepard and Smith, 1989). Parents in this study also described their children as having slightly poorer attitudes toward school compared to a matched control group of children who were not retained. Yet, through interviews with teachers and parents, Smith (1989:145) found that "teachers consistently underplay the extent of conflict with parents over the decision to retain and underestimate the degree of parents' active resistance or passive but unhappy compliance."

Does retention help children close the academic achievement gap?

Numerous research studies on the long term effects of retention have concluded that retaining children does not help them move up academically. In fact, for the vast majority of students, retention has a negative effect on their academic achievement. Researchers have found that children who are overage for their grade are more likely to drop out of school. Roderick (1995) suggests three possible reasons why retention places students at risk of dropping out:

- grade retention as a remedial strategy does not appear to fix school performance;
- retention is the strongest message a teacher or school can give a student that they are not as capable as their agemates; and
- overage students become more frustrated when they struggle with school work.

Grissom and Shepard (1989:34) concluded that "retained students experience a greater risk for dropping out that cannot be explained by their poor achievement." They found that for black males in Austin, Texas, retention increased their risk of dropping out of high school by 27 percent. White females from a high socioeconomic district who were retained increased their chances of not completing high school by 21 percent. Based on their study and review of retention research, Grissom and Shepard (1989:60) stated:

> *For a school district contemplating tougher promotion policies, it is possible to estimate what the effect might be on the district's dropout rate. If annual retention rates are increased, say, from five percent to seven percent, the cumulative retention rate will go up on the order of 20 percent. That is, an additional 20 percent of students will experience retention sometime in their school career. Following from the extra retentions, the district's dropout rate will go up by three to six percentage points. A district that had a 20 percent dropout rate could anticipate a new rate of 25 percent as groups of previously retained students reached high school age.*

However, in a grade retention report by the Massachusetts Department of Education (1990), the authors concluded that in individual cases students can benefit from retention. Schools are unable to predict who these students will be. A study by Sandoval and Hughes (1981) was designed to discover what types of children benefit from retention.

Children who demonstrated greater success after repeating first grade:

- displayed mastery of some academic skills (usually reading);
- had good self-concepts and adequate social skills;
- had parents who were involved in the schools and who had favorable attitudes toward retention;
- demonstrated difficulty with school primarily due to lack of exposure to the material (school transfer or high absenteeism); and

> Retention is a complex and emotionally laden issue.

- received substantially different curricula and methods of instruction during their retained year.

What alternatives to retention are schools exploring?

Smith (1989) found that teachers within the same school typically demonstrated retention practices that matched the other teachers' in their school. In other words, there seemed to be a school culture that affected retention practices. Some schools retained as many as a third of their kindergartners for a second year, and others retained only one or two percent.

Likewise, Allington and McGill-Franzen (1995:53) found that schools with similar student populations responded very differently to children's difficulties with learning. Two schools they researched each had 20 percent of their children eligible for free or reduced lunch. One school had retained, placed in transitional classes, or placed in special education almost two out of every three primary grade students. In the other school about one out of ten students were retained or placed in special education. In describing the two schools the researchers noted:

> *The two communities were not very different, although poverty was higher in the second school. What was different was the institutional ethos in each. The teachers in the first school talked about parents and students in adversarial tones ("us versus them"). In the second school, teachers talked much more respectfully about the children and their parents. Teachers in both schools were generally cordial in their interactions with children, and the hallways of both were bright and decorated with student work (the first school even displayed banners and plaques that had been awarded to denote its excellence).*

School districts also influence or prescribe retention practices within schools. Allington and McGill-Franzen (1991) found that schools with formal retention policies and plans had higher retention rates than schools with no policies.

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Ellwein and Glass (1989) conducted a multi-site case study in which one district had implemented a new retention/promotion policy. They found that although the district very carefully designed and implemented a promotional program to bring order to seemingly illogical and haphazard retention practices, no one was keeping track of what happened. No one knew if the students who failed the required tests were actually being retained. Researchers inferred that the policy was being used only in part. Children who passed the tests were being promoted, but some of the children who did not pass the tests were also being promoted. This raised questions about which children were retained and how the decisions were made.

Many studies have found bias in retention practices. Specifically, children who are retained are more likely to be low-income, male, and minority (Roderick, 1995). In the end it appeared as if the district studied by Ellwein and Glass (1989) had implemented a policy to improve public relations. The degree to which the policy changed practice was not of interest to the district. In their multi-site case study, the researchers found that the circumstances in this district were not unusual.

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continues on page 4

Retention in the Early Grades: Alternative Strategies

As you explore and review your retention practices, it may be helpful to examine some alternative practices used by other school districts. These ideas can help stimulate your thinking about appropriate and effective educational strategies to implement in your school or district.

1. **Promote all low achievers and provide additional instructional support.** One-to-one tutoring programs have had good results in helping students to meet standards (See Allington & Walmsley, *No Quick Fix: Rethinking Literacy Programs in America's Elementary Schools*).
2. **Provide students in a transition program with an enriched curriculum** designed to lead to double promotion so students can catch up with their age cohorts.
3. **Keep teachers with the same students for two or three years** with an emphasis on continuous progress.
4. **Implement multi-age classrooms** where children have more time to learn and advance to the next level after mastering the concepts at their current level.
5. **Develop a summer enrichment or "bridge" program.**
6. **Use supplemental funds from federal categorical programs** like Title I to pay teachers to tutor students individually in reading and writing after school.
7. **Expand parent involvement to include family literacy programs** that teach parents how to support emergent literacy.
8. **Review and/or redesign curriculum** for developmental appropriateness and instructional effectiveness using information from professional associations such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.
9. **Provide intensive staff development for all K-3** teachers in emergent literacy and a common program for teaching reading/language arts.
10. **Provide time for staff to examine current teaching practices.** Use staff development funds to organize study groups to identify alternatives.
11. **Find time to examine your collective beliefs regarding teaching and learning.** Determine ways in which all students can be successful.

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Retention in the Early Grades: A Review of the Research

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For the vast majority of students, retention has a negative effect on their academic achievement.

This article is excerpted from ***Retention in the Early Grades***, a document written by Beckie Anderson for the RMC Research Corporation, and is used with permission. Copies of the entire publication are available from RMC Research Corporation, Writer's Square Suite 540, 1512 Larimer Street, Denver, CO 80202, (800) 922-3636 [voice], (303) 825-1626 [fax], e-mail: [rmc@rmcdenver.com]. The first five copies of any order are available at no cost. Additional copies may be purchased for $10.00 each prepaid.

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Grade Retention: A History of Failure

A long trail of research tells us that retention is not the route to take in our efforts to improve student achievement.

William A. Owings and Susan Magliaro

For almost 50 years, research has shown that grade-level retention provides no academic advantages to students. Yet, the practice is gaining increasing attention as schools face political pressure to demonstrate accountability for student achievement. Publications including ***USA Today*** (Ritter, 1997) and ***Education Week*** (Reynolds, Temple, & McCoy, 1997) have addressed the topic, and President Clinton in his 1997 and 1998 State of the Union Addresses called for increased retention of students with low scores on standardized tests, stating that a child should not move from grade to grade "until he or she is ready." Research suggests that retention is on the rise. According to one study (Roderick, 1995), from 1980 to 1992 the national percentage of retained students increased from approximately 20 percent to nearly 32 percent.

The overly simplistic view of retention as a panacea for education woes ignores its negative impact on children. A walk through history reminds us of what we have learned about retention.

History of Grade Retention

It was not until about 1860 that it became common in U.S. elementary schools to group children in grade levels, with promotion dependent on mastery of a quota of content. The New York City school system was reporting the results of promotion and retention as early as the turn of the century. Maxwell's (1904) age-grade progress study became the standard vehicle for school system reports on retention, promotion, and dropouts. Within the next two decades, researchers started to examine the efficacy of retention in terms of student achievement

The goal of grade retention was to improve school performance by allowing more time for students to develop adequate academic skills (Reynolds, 1992). By the 1930s, researchers were reporting the negative effects of retention on achievement (Ayer, 1933; Kline, 1933). Goodlad (1954) summarized the research between 1924 and 1948 related to grade retention. This synthesis showed that retention did not decrease the variation in student achievement levels and had no positive effect on educational gain. Otto (1951) suggested that retention had no special educational value for children and that the academic gain of nonpromoted students was smaller than the gain of their promoted counterparts.

In the mid-20th century, researchers began to investigate the relationship between retention and dropouts. One study (Berlman, 1949) indicated that students who were retained might be more likely to drop out of school than those who were not retained. This article appeared at a time when the literature was emphasizing the need to keep students in school (Anderson, 1950; Holbeck, 1950; Moffit, 1945; Nancarrow, 1951; Sandin, 1944).

In the 1960s and the 1970s, the pendulum moved toward the social promotion of students. After the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), a time of reduced public confidence in schools, many school systems instituted more stringent promotion and retention policies—in spite of the lack of supportive research evidence (Roderick, 1994). For the public at large, it was counterintuitive to think that retention was not useful in helping students to reach basic skill levels (Natale, 1991).

Current Practice and Research

No precise national data record the exact numbers of retained students. However, a number of studies suggest that retention

continues on page 2

Update

Retention in the Early Grades

In a previous issue of **Of Primary Interest**, an article was excerpted from ***Retention in the Early Grades,*** a document written by Beckie Anderson for the RMC Research Corporation. Unfortunately, the RMC Research staff no longer has free copies of this document available. The publication may be purchased, however, for $10.00 prepaid from RMC Research Corporation, Writer's Square Suite 540, 1512 Larimer Street, Denver, CO 80202, (800) 922-3636 [voice], (303) 825-1626 [fax], e-mail: [rmc@rmcdenver.com].

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Grade Retention: A History of Failure

continued from page 1

has persisted and possibly has increased. The Center for Policy Research in Education (1990) reported that by the 9th grade, approximately 50 percent of all U.S. school students have been retained. Roderick (1995) reported that the proportion of overage students entering high school has risen almost 40 percent since 1975. One synthesis of research indicated that the current level of retention matches that of the early 20th century (Shepard & Smith, 1990).

Of 66 articles on retention written from 1990 to 1997, only 1 supported retention (Lenarduzzi, 1990). These articles and Holmes' (1984) and Holmes and Matthews' (1989) meta-analyses document the effects of retention.

Many studies show the association between retention and dropping out of school (Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989; Dawson, 1991). These studies control for the effects of other influencing factors. Grissom and Shepard (1989) determined that retention significantly increases the probability of dropping out, controlling for prior achievement, sex, and race.

Demographic data show that retained students tend to come from lower socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds than nonretained students (Thomas et al., 1992). Meisels (1993) found that approximately 40 percent of repeaters come from the lowest SES quartile, whereas approximately 8.5 percent come from the highest SES quartile. Meisels (1993) also determined that more than two-thirds of all retentions take place between kindergarten and 3rd grade. Other studies have shown that retained students tend to be male and African American, with parents who are less educated than the parents of nonretained students (Byrd & Weitzman, 1994; Dauber, 1993; Foster, 1993; Meisels, 1993). In California, George (1993) found that retention rates for African Americans and Hispanics are twice the rate for whites. Byrd and Weitzman (1994) examined social and health factors associated with retention. Poverty, gender, mother's education level, hearing and speech impairments, low birth weight, enuresis, and exposure to household smoking are significant predictive factors. Learning disabled students may also be retained more frequently than the general population (McLeskey, Lancaster & Grizzle, 1995).

The long-held belief that early retention is best for students continues to be refuted in the literature (Johnson, 1990; Mantizicopoulos & Morrison, 1992; Thomas et al., 1992). Studies of retention in kindergarten indicate that retained students have significantly lower scores on standardized achievement tests than do nonretained students (Dennebaum & Kulberg, 1994). Another study shows no difference in achievement for retained kindergarten students and the matched control group (Shepard & Smith, 1987). Some research indicates that early retention may produce a short-lived increase in achievement; however, this gain vanishes in two or three years (Butler, 1990; Karweit & Wasik, 1992; Snyder, 1992).

Research indicates that retention produces negative social implications. Kindergarten students who were retained indicated a slightly more negative attitude toward school than did a matched control group (Shepard & Smith, 1987). Retained students may have more behavioral problems than those who are not retained (Meisels, 1993). Rumberger (1987) suggests that retention contributes to a permanent disengagement from school.

Research also shows that retention may have negative effects on long-term student achievement. Holmes' (1989) meta-analysis reviewed 63 controlled studies that compared the progress of retained students with that of lower-achieving promoted students; 54 studies showed negative achievement results for the retained students. Holmes then reviewed only those studies with the greatest statistical control. The negative achievement effects were again demonstrated. These findings were substantially identical to those of Goodlad's analysis in 1954. Subsequent studies have provided little new evidence to contradict Holmes' synthesis of research.

Other studies indicate an increased, cumulative negative effect of retention on achievement for at-risk students (Reynolds, 1992). Retained children may continue to decline in reading achievement over time compared with nonretained students. Whether this cumulative decline occurs in mathematics achievement is uncertain.

Retention Harms Learners

Historically, educators have viewed retention as a means of reducing skill variance in the classroom in an attempt to better meet student needs. Clearly, this practice has not achieved its goal. In the process we have harmed our clients. Physicians take an oath that guides their professional practice—first, do no harm. Educators would do well to take a similar oath. Retention harms an at-risk population cognitively and affectively. Alternatives to consider include requiring summer school, offering intensive remediation before and after school, changing teacher and administrative perceptions, and increasing teacher expectations.

One indicator of a profession is that a body of research guides its practice (Darling-Hammond & Goodwin, 1993). A body of research exists on the subject of retention, and it should guide our practice. If we are to treat our "patients" professionally, we need to stop punishing nonlearners and instead provide opportunities for success.

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The above article appeared in the September 1998 issue of ***Educational Leadership***, 56 (1), 86-88, and is reprinted with the permission of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD). **William A. Owings**, a past president of Virginia's ASCD, is Superintendent of Schools. He may be reached at Accomack County Public Schools, P. O. Box 330, Accomac, Virginia 23301. **Susan Magliaro**, Associate Professor of Education, may be reached at Virginia Tech, Department of Teaching and Learning, War Memorial Gym, Blacksburg, Virginia 24601.

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Third-Grade Literacy Accomplishments

Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children (1998) and **Starting Out Right: A Guide to Promoting Children's Reading Success** (1999) present highlights of literacy acquisition, sets of accomplishments that the successful learner should exhibit by the end of each of the primary grades. Although the timing of these accomplishments will vary among children, they are the sorts of things that should be in place before entering the next grade.

Accomplishments for third-graders include:

- Reads aloud with fluency and comprehension any text that is appropriately designed for grade level.
- Uses letter-sound correspondence knowledge and structural analysis to decode words.
- Reads and comprehends both fiction and nonfiction that is appropriately designed for grade level.
- Reads longer fictional selections and chapter books independently.
- Takes part in creative responses to texts such as dramatizations, oral presentations, fantasy play, etc.
- Can point to or clearly identify specific words or wordings that are causing comprehension difficulties.
- Summarizes major points from fiction and nonfiction texts.
- In interpreting fiction, discusses underlying theme or message.
- Asks how, why, and what-if questions in interpreting nonfiction texts.
- In interpreting nonfiction, distinguishes cause and effect, fact and opinion, main ideas and supporting details.
- Uses information and reasoning to examine bases of hypotheses and opinions.
- Infers word meaning from taught roots, prefixes, and suffixes.
- Correctly spells previously studied words and language patterns in own writing.
- Begins to incorporate literacy words and language patterns in own writing (e.g., elaborates descriptions; uses figurative wording).
- With some guidance, uses all aspects of the writing process in producing own compositions and reports.
- Combines information from multiple sources in writing reports.
- With assistance, suggests and implements editing and revision to clarify and refine own writing.
- Presents and discusses own writing with other students and responds helpfully to other students' compositions.
- Independently reviews work for spelling, mechanics, and presentation.
- Produces a variety of written work (e.g., literature response, reports, "published" books, semantic maps) in a variety of formats including multimedia forms.

The above excerpt is reprinted with permission from **Starting Out Right: A Guide to Promoting Children's Reading Success**. Copies of the entire publication are available from the National Academy Press, 2101 Constitution Avenue, NW, Lockbox 285, Washington, DC 20055, (800) 624-6242, at a cost of $14.95 per book. The report is also available online at <http://www.nap.edu>.

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MYTHS ABOUT LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

Judith A. Schickedanz

We all know that before children walk, they sit, crawl, and pull themselves up to stand. We know too that before children use mature speech, they coo and babble, and then use holophrases and telegraphic sentences. We take for granted that motor skills and oral language develop continuously over a period of years. A long history of continuous development is typical in the area of literacy learning too, although it has taken educators and child development experts a remarkably long time to begin to think about literacy in this way.

Why did it take so long for everyone to realize that literacy learning begins years before children receive specific instruction in first grade? Why does it sound strange to many people even now when this claim is made? Some longstanding myths may have prevented our seeing that reading and writing do not simply appear suddenly at a single point in time but emerge slowly over the course of several years.

Myth #1. Oral language must develop before written language can begin. Children are still in the process of mastering some of the basic aspects of oral language until the age of 5 or 6. For this reason, people once thought that written language development should not begin until after that age (e.g., Mattingly 1979).

Evidence: Although oral language development is essential to good written language development, it is not a prerequisite in the way once believed. Oral and written language skills develop simultaneously, with each supporting the other. For example, a good oral vocabulary helps children understand stories adults read to them and, later, stories they read to themselves. But children also learn many new words from listening to stories (Elley 1989; Adams 1990; Robbins & Ehri 1994). Similarly, sensitivity to the individual sounds of language, which develops as children hear and recite nursery rhymes and sing songs, aids in learning to read and write because it helps children become aware of the unit of sound represented by alphabet letters. Then, seeing the sequence of letters used to write words, such as the child's name or the words in a favorite book title, further increases children's sensitivity to the sounds that various words contain (Ehri 1975).

Myth #2. Children learn oral language naturally, but they acquire literacy-related knowledge only through direct instruction. The belief that children do not learn about aspects of written language somewhat as they develop oral language results from misunderstandings about the development of both oral and written language. First, the experiences needed to support oral language learning have often gone unrecognized. Second, the beginnings of literacy development have often been completely overlooked or ignored. Ask parents when their child began to talk, and they give the age at which their child first used some well-articulated words, not the age when the child began to read or write. But ask parents when a child began to read or write, and they are reluctant to give the child credit until such behaviors match the conventional, or adult, models.

Because they overlook many of children's emergent literacy behaviors, considering them to be unrelated to later literacy behaviors, adults believe that children do not begin to learn about literacy until they get formal lessons in school. Thus, we tend to overestimate the extent to which oral language learning simply unfolds through maturation, regardless of social circumstances, while we underestimate the extent to which written language learning can occur in day-to-day functional contexts starting long before children receive formal instruction in the classroom.

Evidence: The kinds of social interaction necessary to support oral language learning have often gone unrecognized because parents and other caregivers talk to children in order to communicate, not because they are trying to teach their children to talk. Nevertheless, when we take a close look, we find that oral language does not occur without considerable interaction with adults or older children. If infants were placed in rooms with television sets but no responsive human beings, we would see how dependent oral language learning actually is on social interaction. Language develops when adults include infants and young children in conversation and when they treat them as conversational partners (Wells 1985; Huttenlocher et al. 1991; Hart & Risley 1995; Huttenlocher 1995). In fact, tutoring is embedded in these interactions, as young children and adults communicate for a variety of purposes. Progress in language development is impeded, sometimes significantly, if children are not frequently engaged by adults in language interactions (Akhtar, Dunham, & Dunham 1991; Huttenlocher et al. 1991; Hart & Risley 1995; Oller et al. 1995).

The child is certainly predisposed—indeed wired—to learn language. However, it is misleading to claim that language emerges spontaneously in a child or that being surrounded by talk is enough. *Being included in talk and having talk adapted to your current level of talking* are required for optimal learning of oral language. Many adults speak to babies and very young children in a way that makes language more salient to them and perhaps easier to learn. This special way of talking to very young children has been called *child-directed speech* (Fernald et al. 1989).

Children learn about written language in a similar, socially mediated way. This means that written language learning also depends upon interactions and that tutoring is embedded in these interactions. A great deal of explicit literacy instruction is typically provided to young children in context, often in response to children's requests for

continues on page 2

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Myths

continued from page 1

information and help. For example, when given paper and crayons with which to draw, children many times try to write their names. In the course of these attempts, they frequently enlist adult help. When adults respond to these requests, they often name the letters needed to spell the child's name, demonstrate how the letters are formed, and even relate the letters to the sounds heard when the name is spoken. Children also learn about the functions of written language as they observe and help parents make lists, write letters to family members or friends, or read menus in a restaurant.

Myth #3. Children must achieve a certain level of physical and mental readiness before written language learning can occur. Some children mature early in the ways needed; others mature late. Variations in rates of literacy development are due primarily to individual differences in children's learning rates rather than to differences in children's early literacy experiences.

Evidence: First, in instances where considerable progress in literacy development has occurred before a child enters school, environments have provided children not only with physical resources but also with social resources—with people who give children information and demonstrations and answer children's questions (Durkin 1966; Read 1975; Teale 1978; Bissex 1980; Baghban 1984; Schickedanz & Sullivan 1984; Schieffelin & Cochran-Smith 1984; Schickedanz 1990; Schickedanz 1998). Teale (1982) explains the conditions which need to be met for literacy learning to occur:

> *In one respect there is a literacy environment "out there" from which children might abstract features of reading and writing. Considerable print exists in the preschooler's world, and virtually every child in literate societies like ours has the opportunity to observe others reading and writing. But...children who learn to read and write before going to school do not do so simply by observing others engaged in literacy events and by independently examining and manipulating a written language. In an important sense the child's literacy environment does not have an independent existence; it is constructed in the interactions between the child and those persons around him or her.... In fact, the whole process of natural literacy development hinges upon the experiences the child has in reading and writing activities which are mediated by literate adults, older siblings, or events in the child's everyday life (p. 559).*

For many years, few researchers who were very interested in literacy development looked closely at the interactions between children and adults (Hiebert & Raphael 1998). Instead, they interviewed the parents after a child displayed high levels of literacy development—usually when the child entered kindergarten or first grade. Researchers asked parents to recall what they did during the preschool years that might be responsible for their child's precocious literacy development (Durkin 1966; Read 1975; Price 1976). Parents often reported that they had done nothing in particular to help their child learn to read or write, although they typically recalled engaging the child in specific kinds of experiences such as story reading. They often reported that the children memorized favorite storybooks and then learned to actually read the words first in these, and then in other, books "all on their own." Because many parents are unaware of the learning they promote when they read a story, write the child's name on a drawing, or engage in countless other literacy activities with their children, the interviewed parents almost certainly underreported what they did. Their behaviors seem so natural and ordinary to parents—so much a part of their daily lives—that they do not even realize they are providing many informal literacy lessons each day (McLane & McNamee 1990).

These studies (Durkin 1966; Read 1975; Price 1976), and others like them, were misinterpreted for a number of years, contributing to the false impression that early literacy development is a natural development. Readiness to "soak up" literacy knowledge was in turn considered to be a matter of the child's maturational timetable.

When researchers actually watch parent-child interactions, or when they ask parents to keep a diary record of what they do to support their child's literacy development, a fuller picture of adults' role in children's literacy development emerges (Schickedanz 1998). Parents vary considerably in the extent to which they mediate print for their children and in the specific ways they do it. (Scollon & Scollon 1981; Heath 1983; Teale 1986). Preschool teachers also vary considerably in the ways they interact with children, for example, when reading stories. There are specific consequences associated with these variations (Heath 1983; Dickinson & Smith 1994). Clearly, some ways of interacting with children are more helpful to them than are other ways.

Children who acquire a lot of literacy knowledge and skill before entering first grade are most likely to be those who have had a rich history of skillfully mediated literacy experiences. Children do vary, of course, in terms of the extent that they can benefit from specific experiences. Some children learn quickly from experience and thus need fewer experiences than do other children to make a specific amount of progress. However, the astonishing variations we see among children as they enter kindergarten and first grade seem to be due to wide variations in the amount and kinds of literacy experience different groups of children have during their early years. Opportunities for learning about reading and writing are simply more prevalent when children live in some circumstances than when they live in other circumstances. Parents with more education and greater financial resources often are able to provide more opportunities than are parents with fewer resources. Of course, socioeconomic and other circumstances do not necessarily define opportunities. Among families living in similar circumstances, parents vary in terms of literacy experiences they provide to their children.

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He Has A Summer Birthday: The Kindergarten Entrance Age Dilemma

Sandra Crosser

David would be 5 in July. Full of enthusiasm, he confidently underwent spring kindergarten screening. The school psychologist explained that David completed the screening with average and above-average skills, but he had a summer birthday and he was a male. The psychologist and the gym teacher agreed that David would be more successful in school if he were to postpone kindergarten for 1 year.

David's experience has been repeated over and over by many children across the country. Educators are commonly recommending that children born during the summer months be given an extra year to mature so that they will not suffer from the academic disadvantages of being among the youngest children in a class. Terms such as "academic red-shirting" and "graying of the kindergarten" have been invented to describe the practice and effects of holding children back from kindergarten (Bracey, 1989; Suro, 1992).

Small-scale studies of limited geographic areas suggest that delayed kindergarten entrance involves anywhere from 9% to 64% of the eligible kindergarten population (Meisels, 1992). However, data collected for the large-scale National Household Education Survey (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 1997) indicated that 9% of the first- and second-graders had been held back from kindergarten. Surveyed parents reported that children who had delayed kindergarten entrance 1 year were most likely to have been male (64%), white (73%), and born between July and December (70%). Compared to children born in the first quarter of the year, children born in the summer months were twice as likely to have delayed kindergarten entrance 1 year after they were first eligible.

Substantial numbers of parents and educators believe that children born in the summer months will gain an academic advantage if kindergarten entrance is delayed 1 year. Is it a disadvantage to be among the youngest, rather than the oldest, in a kindergarten class?

What does the Research Reveal?

A review of the relevant literature reveals that few studies have been undertaken to examine whether or not children with summer birthdays do better academically when they postpone kindergarten entrance 1 year. Problems also arise because some of the research often cited in support of delayed entrance is poorly designed, has focused on children with learning disabilities or on early entrants, has relied on subjective parent or teacher reports, or has not looked specifically at children born during the summer months.

The related research is meager and somewhat contradictory. In general, studies indicate that the youngest children in a class may score slightly below the oldest children in a class, but any differences tend to be small and may be transitory (Morrison, Griffith, & Alberts, 1997; Cameron & Wilson, 1990; Kinard & Reinherz, 1986; Smith & Shepard, 1987; NCES, 1997).

The sparsity of evidence related specifically to summer-born children prompted an investigation comparing the academic achievement of two groups of children born in June, July, August, or September: those who entered kindergarten just after turning 5 and those who were held out 1 year and entered kindergarten at age 6 (Crosser, 1991). Each child who delayed entrance was matched with a child of like intelligence who had not delayed entrance. Boys were matched boys, and girls with girls.

All of the children took standardized achievement tests during fifth or sixth grade. Those test scores were used to compare the achievement of summer-born children who had entered school on time.

Results of the study indicated that, given similar levels of intelligence, boys with summer birth dates tended to be advantaged academically by postponing kindergarten entrance 1 year. The advantage was greatest in the area of reading. Reading scores for females and math scores for both males and females did not show significant statistical differences.

Results of such small-scale studies need to be replicated before educators will be able to make informed recommendations about optimum kindergarten entrance age. There is no clear-cut evidence that delaying kindergarten for the youngest entrants will provide some magical academic advantage. Because there is so little entrance age evidence, and because some of that evidence is conflicting, there does not appear to be a strong academic basis for delaying kindergarten entrance for summer-born children.

A responsible physician would not recommend any treatment that had not been scientifically tested and retested for effectiveness. She would need to know the specific symptoms for which the treatment was effective. She would need to know the success rate of the treatment and what complicating side effects and interactions were possible before prescribing the treatment.

Responsible educators also have a need to know the facts before recommending treatment for a child whose only symptoms are being born in July and being male. Nevertheless, the reality is that both teachers and parents are accepting the idea that delaying school entrance for summer birth date children is sound practice.

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Birthday

continued from page 3

How Does Holding Out Affect the Kindergarten Experience?

It has been reported that affluent parents tend to hold out their summer-born children more often than do low socioeconomic status parents (Meisels, 1992). If that is the case, the children who may be at academic risk from factors associated with poverty face the additional hurdle of being compared to advantaged children who are 12 to 15 months older. We should expect that the economically disadvantaged children may be outperformed by their classmates who are both chronologically and developmentally their seniors.

In the real-life kindergarten classroom, the youngest children may appear to be immature and unready to tackle the tasks that their significantly older classmates find challenging and intriguing. As the curriculum and academic expectations increase to meet the needs of the 6-year-old children, there is a real danger that the kindergarten program will become developmentally inappropriate for the very young children it is meant to serve.

Did David's Parents Make the Right Decision?

David is 15 now. When he was 13, he towered above his classmates as he walked through the halls. The school desks just didn't fit his 6'3" body, and many of his teachers assumed that he must have been retained since he was older than the other students. When asked what grade he is in, David always makes it a point to explain that he started kindergarten late.

But David is well liked by students and teachers. He moved into both puberty and formal operational thought sooner than his classmates, earning their admiration. Academically, David does average and above-average work with minimal effort. Did David's parents make the right decision in holding him out from kindergarten? They don't know. They will probably never know, but David thinks he knows the answer.

Conclusion

Academic achievement is only one piece of the school entrance age puzzle. The child's physical, social, and emotional development are key pieces, as well. It would seem to be the course of wisdom to consider the whole child in all of his or her aspects when making decisions about school entrance. The answers are not simple. They are further complicated because each child is different biologically and emotionally. Each child brings his own special characteristics with him as he lives and works through his unique life experiences.

The counsel of educators can bring about life-changing events in a young child's world. Blanket recommendations to hold back one group of children only serve to change who will be part of the youngest group. As educators, we must resist the urge to follow the unfounded advice of those who would recommend uniform practices that would exclude any group of children from our schools. Educators must consider the individual child as we continue to build a stronger knowledge base upon which to make entrance age decisions.

For more information

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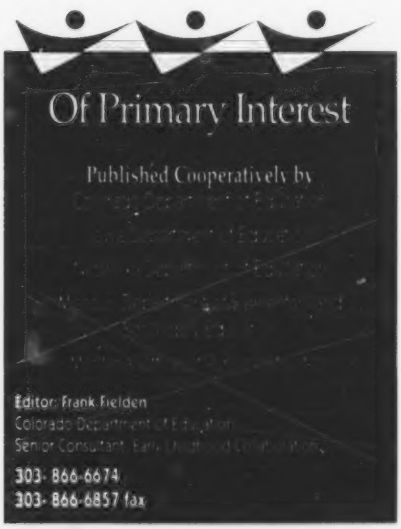

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EFFECTIVE FIRST-GRADE TEACHING METHODS

The National Research Center on English Learning & Achievement (CELA), located at the University of Albany, part of the State University system in New York, has released data demonstrating a connection between a set of first-grade teaching practices and student reading performance. A study of 30 schools in five states [California, New Jersey, New York, Texas, and Wisconsin] found that when a particular combination of teaching methods was used, it led to student achievement, particularly among the students who began first grade as low achievers. This new study shows that students read better because they are encouraged to read and write extensively. To make this happen, their teachers:

- Emphasize reading, writing, and literature;
- Monitor student development and teach skills explicitly, typically in context;
- Assign texts and tasks at which students can succeed;
- Accelerate demands as students gain competence; and
- Draw connections across the curriculum.

The teachers can give students individual attention because they

- Manage their classrooms well;
- Teach children to take responsibility for their behavior and learning; and
- Teach children a variety of strategies to use as they read and write independently.

Among the measures the researchers used to assess effectiveness was the CTB-McGraw Hill Terra Nova reading achievement test. Results of end-of-the-year testing are dramatic: the most striking difference between student performance among the two groups of teachers was that the lowest achieving students in the most effective teachers' classrooms outscored their peers in the more typical classrooms to a significant degree on three key sub-tests: passage reading, vocabulary, and word analysis. Passage reading and vocabulary produce a composite score.

The most striking difference between student performance among the two groups of teachers was that the lowest achieving students in the most effective teachers' classrooms outscored their peers in the more typical classrooms to a significant degree on three key sub-tests: passage reading, vocabulary, and word analysis.

The gains low-achieving students made during the year enabled them to not only pull ahead of their peers, but to equal or, in some cases, to surpass the achievement of the "average" students in the more typical classrooms.

Overall, the students in the most effective classrooms outperformed those in the more typical classrooms on the end-of-the-year test, with the most significant difference being in their word analysis skills.

These findings are the result of research carried out with a diverse group of students, including many considered "at risk" of school failure. The study is currently being validated in fourth-grade classrooms in many parts of the United States, and the researchers are developing materials to help teachers learn to use the identified strategies.

Resources available to date include various newsletter articles, a four-color poster for teachers that lists the characteristics of effective instruction (available by request from CELA), and the report itself, available online at <http://cela.albany.edu/1stgradelit/index.html>, or by contacting Janet Angelis, CELA Associate Director, (518) 442-5023.

CELA is dedicated to improving the teaching and learning of English and the language arts. In particular, CELA focuses on essential skills and emphasizes that students need to read, write, listen, and speak well about a variety of content and subject matter. CELA serves as the national research center that focuses on student literacy, K-12, and is funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement. The above information is reprinted from press releases provided by CELA, which may be contacted at the National Research Center on English Learning & Achievement, University of Albany, SUNY, ED-89, 1400 Washington Avenue, Albany, NY 12222, (518) 442-5026.

FIRST-GRADE TEACHERS WHO BUILD STRONG READERS AND WRITERS

Emphasize reading, writing, and literature, e.g., through teacher reading, author studies, book discussions, and accessible classroom collections.

Set high but realistic expectations—and consistently encourage students to try more challenging tasks. Teachers monitor student use of skills, provide prompts, and offer much "scaffolding" during reading and writing activities.

Make the classroom a positive, reinforcing, cooperative environment. Teachers encourage cooperation among students and build it into daily activities. They model positive talk and reinforce effort in academic work.

Provide long, uninterrupted periods for successful reading and writing experiences. Students read and write every day.

Teach literacy skills explicitly, in context. Reading and writing tasks provide contexts for planful, opportunistic, explicit teaching, and frequent practice opportunities for students.

Make strong connections across the curriculum. Teachers integrate reading and writing, provide seamless instruction, and employ literacy strategies to help students gain content knowledge.

Foster student self-regulation. Teachers explicitly encourage students to self-monitor use of time, organization, and work habits.

Demonstrate excellent classroom management skills. Their instructional planning is evident, they make rules and expectations clear, meaningfully engage assistants, and give students plenty of academically manageable tasks

ASSESSING FOR READINESS?

Susan Sidney Smith

Although there may be merit in knowing colors, shapes, and how to skip, it is difficult to justify how these concepts predict future academic learning. Knowledge of letters can be important; research has found strong relationships between kindergartners' letter-name knowledge and 1st grade reading achievement (de Hirsch, Jansky, & Langford, 1966). Nonetheless, using a child's letter-name performance as a school readiness predictor can be deceptive. Reports from several studies (for example, Scanlon, Vellutino, Small, Spearing, & Wharton-McDonald, 1993) have identified kindergarten entrants who knew all their letter names and then struggled to learn to read in subsequent years. A child's letter-name knowledge is easy to assess, but it falls short of accurately predicting his or her future school success.

Measuring social maturity may also be risky. All too often, teachers are asked to briefly observe and then to recommend 5-year-olds who may be better suited for a developmental program or who may need an additional year before entering school. Despite the good intentions of the recommendations, the notion that children can benefit from spending an extra year in a less challenging environment is unfounded. Interactions and experiences with more mature role models greatly influence children's social development. Therefore, staying at home, in preschool, or in a special developmental program is counterproductive. Entrants who exhibit immature behaviors or demonstrate limited knowledge of so-called readiness concepts need to participate in rich, stimulating programs that enhance both their social and their intellectual development.

Conventional readiness practices often contradict a substantial body of research findings. May and Welch (1984) compared the achievement of students placed in a developmental kindergarten with that of two groups, those who were recommended for other placement but chose to enter regular kindergarten and those who attended regular kindergarten. By the end of 3rd grade, the developmental kindergartners were the lowest achieving group of the three, even through they were one year older.

Primary teachers base beliefs about the benefits of retention on incomplete and misleading information.

Banerji (1990) examined the effects of developmental kindergarten in a four-year longitudinal study. He found that the developmental kindergartners benefitted from the program in the first two years, but did not benefit in the third and fourth years. Even initial benefits were tempered by the fact that the developmental kindergartners were a year older than their comparison group.

Hence, the extra-year program is difficult to justify. Developmental kindergartens require costly expenditures from schools and irreplaceable time from children—with virtually no guarantee of rewards. In an attempt to link kindergarten practices with empirical findings, the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education issued a Summary of Principles for Kindergarten Entry and Placement (1987). The organization recommends that "all children should be welcomed as they are into heterogeneous kindergarten settings...they are not segregated into extra-year programs prior to or following regular kindergarten" (p. 3).

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Clearly, kindergarten classes should represent children with different abilities. Just as we expect children to enter schools in different sizes and shapes, we should celebrate their diverse range of skills and knowledge. Students can learn from one another, as well as from good teachers.

The immature child observes how more mature children interact with one another and benefits from the observation. The less knowledgeable child shares books with and writes alongside more experienced readers and writers. Today, our best kindergarten programs strive to promote learning for all children. Our mission is not to homogenize the group by requiring standard K-level performance from all children. Indeed, some have already surpassed these standards before they enter kindergarten. Rather, every child should experience a stimulating program.

Children who enter school already reading need to be challenged to expand their abilities at more advanced levels. Others who enter with little awareness of letters or print should be encouraged to learn about literacy concepts. More important, we must realize that these less literate kindergartners are not anomalies—they enter our schools every year. Hence, the only truly predictable aspect of school readiness is that children will enroll with wide diversity in their abilities.

References

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The above article is excerpted from Susan Sidney Smith's "*Reforming the Kindergarten Round-Up,*" which appeared in the March 1999 issue of **Educational Leadership**, 56 (6), 39-44, and is used with the permission of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD).

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Despite the good intentions of the recommendations, the notion that children can benefit from spending an extra year in a less challenging environment is unfounded.

FIRST-GRADE LITERACY ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children (1998) and **Starting Out Right: A Guide to Promoting Children's Reading Success** (1999) present highlights of literacy acquisition, sets of accomplishments that the successful learner should exhibit by the end of each of the primary grades. Although the timing of these accomplishments will vary among children, they are the sorts of things that should be in place before entering the next grade.

Accomplishments for a first-grader include:

- Makes a transition from emergent to "real" reading.
- Reads aloud with accuracy and comprehension any text that is appropriately designed for the first half of grade one.
- Accurately decodes orthographically regular one-syllable words and nonsense words (e.g., "sit," "zot"), using print-sound mappings to sound out unknown words.
- Uses letter-sound correspondence knowledge to sound out unknown words when reading text.
- Recognizes common, irregularly spelled words by sight ("have," "said," "where," "two").
- Has a reading vocabulary of 300 to 500 sight words and easily sounded-out words.
- Monitors own reading and self-corrects when an incorrectly identified word does not fit with cues provided by the letters in the word or the context surrounding the word.
- Reads and comprehends both fiction and nonfiction that is appropriately designed for the grade level.
- Shows evidence of expanding language repertoire, including increasing appropriate use of standard, more formal language.
- Creates own written texts for others to read.
- Notices when difficulties are encountered in understanding text.
- Reads and understands simple written instructions.
- Predicts and justifies what will happen next in stories.
- Discusses prior knowledge of topics in expository texts.
- Uses how, why, and what-if questions to discuss nonfiction texts.
- Describes new information gained from texts in own words.
- Distinguishes whether simple sentences are incomplete or fail to make sense; notices when simple texts fail to make sense.

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- Can answer simple written comprehension questions based on the material read.
- Can count the number of syllables in a word.
- Can blend or segment the phonemes of most one-syllable words.
- Spells correctly three- and four-letter short vowel words.
- Composes fairly readable first drafts using appropriate parts of the writing process (some attention to planning, drafting, rereading for meaning, and some self-correction).
- Uses invented spelling or phonics-based knowledge to spell independently, when necessary.
- Shows spelling consciousness or sensitivity to conventional spelling.
- Uses basic punctuation and capitalization.
- Produces a variety of types of compositions (e.g., stories, descriptions, journal entries) showing appropriate relationships between printed text, illustrations, and other graphics.
- Engages in a variety of literacy activities voluntarily (e.g., choosing books and stories to read, writing a note to a friend).

The above excerpt is reprinted with permission from **Starting Out Right: A Guide to Promoting Children's Reading Success**. Copies of the entire publication are available from the National Academy Press, 2101 Constitution Avenue, NW, Lockbox 285, Washington, DC 20055, (800) 624-6242, at a cost of $14.95 per book. The report is also available online at <http://www.nap.edu>.

Of Primary Interest Online

Of Primary Interest is now available on the internet. Issues may be retrieved by accessing the website which the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE) maintains, courtesy of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education. As each issue has been published since 1997-98, it has been posted on the NAECS/SDE website. Plans call for all past issues (1993-97) to be posted as well, in order to form a chronological archive. *Of Primary Interest* may accessed at <http://ericps.crc.uiuc.edu/naecs/opinl.html>.

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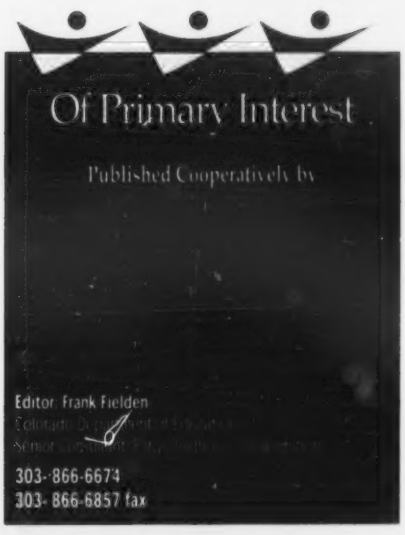

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